2:Scott G-5 (1870's-1909)1910 AP1 Burma
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CHAPTER IX

THE HOUSE AND ITS BELONGINGS

It is singular that in a country where the pagodas and temples will compare in stately grandeur and symmetry of form with the sacred edifices of any part of the world, and where the monastic buildings, though only constructed of wood, strike the most casual observer with their shapely beauty and wealth of decoration; it is singular where there is a taste for such edifices and abundance of the architectural skill necessary to erect them, that the Burman should in the vast majority of cases live in the flimsiest of bamboo huts. The original cause may be found perhaps in the stringent regulations of the Yāzagaing. In native Burma the shape of a man's house was fixed for him by law according to his station in life. All were one-storeyed, save where exceptional royal favour had granted the spire-like roof to a distinguished noble or a feudatory chief. Brick houses were forbidden, from the apprehension that the inhabitants might take it into their heads to turn them into fortifications. Gilding was forbidden to all subjects, and permission to lacquer and paint the pillars of their houses granted to but a very few, and it was expressly laid down that no one should have an arch over his door. This may account for the paltry and even wretched appearance of most villages, but it is undeniable that though nowadays, they are very considerably more substantial, yet a rich man never by any chance thinks of building himself a grand house, and remains firmly by the unpretentious model of his ancestors. This is the more curious, because they will spare no expense to buy gay turbans and bright-coloured pasos for themselves, and costly

2:Scott G-5 (1870's-1909)1910 AP1 Burma
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517 silks for their wives. The ordinary explanation is that every one can see what clothes you wear, while few people care to come and spy out what kind of a house you live in, and how you fare. But there can be very little doubt that the real 565 reason is a survival of the idea of the old Yāzagaing, as 342 well as the fact that long years of custom have impressed • 641 upon everybody the opinion that there are only two forms of architecture, the secular and the ecclesiastical, and no one, no matter how sure he might be that the Government would take no notice of his ambition, would brave the denunciations of the religious by adding a spire to his house, or even adorning the gable ends with carved pinnacles and flamboyant finials of the monasteries. Consequently the one regular form prevails everywhere.

342 The Burman's dwelling, then, is always shaped more or 576 less like a marquee tent, and never more than one storey high, to avoid the humiliating possibility of the feet of some one being over your head. But the whole house stands on posts, so that the floor is seven or eight feet from the ground. It consists often of only one room, usually, however, of two or more, and to the front of the house there is always a verandah, three or four feet lower than the general level of the house, and as often as not quite open to the street, or the garden, or whatever may be in front and always to the sky. [551] The posts which form the main or central part of the house are usually six in number, and all have their names, such as 353 Uyu, Kya-hngan, Nyaung-yan. The south post, in the 776 main part of the house, the Thabye-taing, is the best known as being always adorned with leaves and particularly marked as that in the top of which most probably lives the nat-spirit of the house. A dead body, after being swathed, and while [764] waiting for the coffin, is always placed by it.

341 A house ought never to be built till the foundations have 787 been thoroughly dug up and shown to a soothsayer. He will determine, from the substances found, whether it is a lucky place to build a house in or not. It stands to reason that the building cannot be commenced till a lucky day and hour have been sought out. There is considerable care to be observed in the selection of the timber. Posts are masculine, feminine, and neuter. Male posts are of equal size at both

2:Scott G-5 (1870's-1909)1910 AP1 Burma
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colonel of the local militia, and revenue collector for his locality, whether province, circle, or simple village. The fixed revenue demanded by the myosa, whether prince of the blood-royal, minister of state, maid of honour, royal spittoon-bearer, or white elephant, was remitted to Mandalay by the resident lord-lieutenant of the province, together with a certain over-plus for the "province-eater's," secretary, clerk, and treasurer. The whole amounted to from sixty to eighty per cent of the money nominally raised from the people, and the money kept back was supposed to pay for the services of the myowun and his subordinates. But they would have been very much less great people if they got no more than this. It is impossible to say how much money was collected in any one district, or even in any single town. The steatite pencil records were easily effaced and altered, even if they were ever accurate, and no one knew anything of the details of taxation. A certain circle of villages was called upon to produce a certain amount of revenue to go to the capital, and as long as this was regularly paid no questions were asked. The governor divided out amongst the circles the quota each was expected to pay, and the taikthugyi in his turn made the allotment for the villages under his control; finally the village headman gave his instructions to the tithing-men, and they extorted all they could from the householders under their control. The system was admirably planned, but the working of it was execrable in its cruelty. Every Burman was the king's slave, and could not leave the district, far less the country, without the royal permission granted through the local authorities. The men who came down to reap British Burma paddy-fields in November and December had all of them to leave hostages behind, their wives and families or some near relation, to guarantee that they would return when the season was over to pay their ngwedaw.

This ngwedaw, or "royal silver," was the main source of the revenue. It was a house-tax or family-tax, not a capitation-tax, though its incidence was generally so arranged that it practically came to be a poll assessment, or at any rate a kind of rude property-tax. The amount of land cultivated, which naturally varied according to the number of hands

16:Fielding Hall G-3 (1885-1890) 1898 AP1 Burma
Burmese AP4

642 their own eyes, and made as much money as they
681 could, while they could. They collected the taxes and as much more as they could get; they administered the laws of Manu in civil and criminal affairs, except when tempted to deviate therefrom by good reasons; they carried out orders received from Mandalay, when these orders fell in with their own desires, or when they considered that disobedi-
[641] ence might be dangerous. It is a Burmese proverb
[539] that officials are one of the five great enemies of mankind, and there was, I think (at all events in the latter days of the kingdom), good reason to remember it. And yet these officials were not bad men in themselves; on the contrary, many of them were men of good purpose, of natural honesty, of right principles. In a well-organized system they would have done well, but the system was rotten to the core.

642 It may be asked why the Burmese people remained quiet under such a rule as this; why they did not rise and destroy it, raising a new one in its place; how it was that such a state of corruption lasted for a year, let alone for many years.

And the answer is this: However bad the government may have been, it had the qualities of its defects. If it did not do much to help the people, it did little to hinder them. To a great extent it left them alone to manage their own affairs in their own way. Burma in those days was like a great untended garden, full of weeds, full of flowers too, each plant striving after its own way, gradually evolving into higher forms. Now sometimes it seems to me to be like an old Dutch garden, with

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day on the calendar but the second phongyi decided to embark anyway. Both phongyis were lost when the boat sank that day.

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The revered position of phongyis is open to all regardless of birth or position. It is felt that some take up the robe because they are unsuccessful in life, or wish an "easy living" - but perhaps this attitude is one of modern sophisticates. Certainly the dominant position of the brotherhood is unchallenged. Occasionally differences arise between the headman and the phongyis of a village. But the phongyis invariably prevail. Offending laymen can be "deprived the gate of heaven" by phongyis refusing to accept HSOON, alms, from th this is called inverting the begging bowl THA-BEIT-MAUK-TAI (Begging

[468] bowl-upturn) and is the current phrase for any sort of a "strike".

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Some unprincipalled phongyis have sought to enrich themselves by accepting gifts of land or other property, or by selling gifts for money to traders. When they leave the brotherhood and become laymen again this property becomes theirs. Such occurences appear to be rare and are controlled by stipulations of the givers. For example a donor would hesitate to give paddy land to a suspected phongyi but might agree to giving the crops while retaining title.

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The government or administrative class is looked up to with great respect - in part a carry over from the days of royalty, in part an attitude towards power and influence. However, while the villager today may not know the details of the new constitution he knows there is a "code" wherein he can secure impartial justice.

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Q. "We want to know your relations with adherents of other religions. There are people who worship Indian gods, Chinese gods, and Christians - what is your attitude towards them?"

A. (U.M.) "I don't hold any attitude at all."

Q. " Do you get on well?"

A. (U.M.) "Yes. We get on very well. They buy our goods and we buy theirs. They rent our fields and cultivate them. If there are cows they are borrowed and lent. We live together like this - buying and selling."

Q. "This is about the people. How about their attitude towards their gods?"

A. "I have no attitude."

Q. "Have you never thought about it?"

A. "I have never thought about it. Their god is only slightly different. There is only one god. There will be only one god. Only people differ somewhat. Our outlook should be improved. After all, his god is my god and my god is his god. Only the races differ. Even one race is divided within itself."

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The relationship of the family to the state in Pathwe involve taxes, military service and voting. In the pre-war days, U Myaing and family had to pay a capitation tax, levied at the rate of Rs. 5/- per year for a married couple, and Rs. 2/8 per year for a bachelor of twenty and over. Children and unmarried women and widows are exempt from any tax whatsoever. There was a land tax on cultivation fields - levied at the rate of annas 2 per acre per annum, and also on garden land at one anna or two annas per acre per annum according to the value of the land. The tax on INS - or purchase of the fishery rights amounted to a figure anywhere between Rs. 3000/- and Rs. 12,000/-. U Myaing is not liable to taxes because of his low income, he retains his voting privileges for general elections.

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The family was moved from Pathwe to the refugee camp because of the insurrection and has been under the protection of the government since coming to camp. The proportion of food and shelter benefits, which they receive from the government, has been noted under those headings. According to government policy, shelter is provided for the family, and food for all except one adult who is expected to work.

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Education for U Myaing's children is provided by the government both in Pantanaw and in the refugee camp. Only the cost of the books has to be paid by him.

Children in the Pathwe village learnt their lessons at the government school. This school, which was on YWE-GYI-BET side, teaches pupils up to the tenth standard. The school house was built by contributions taken in the village. When U Myaing was young, they had to pay a tuition fee of four annas each to the schoolmaster every month. Now government has taken over the cost of educating the children, and fees are no longer required of them. The children only have to bring their own books and pencils. There are three teachers in the school; one headmaster and two assistants. The headmaster draws a salary of Rs. 100/- and the assistants of over Rs. 90/- each. There are other schools across the river but they teach only up till the fourth standard, and children of higher grades have to come to YWE-GYI-BET to attend school.

Addenda

U Myaing is not a member of any political party. He is concerned mainly with his work and the daily task of providing food for his family. He does not belong to any union or other organisation of workers. 621 722 622

There are about 1500 people in the refugee camp living in 14 or 15 buildings. The schoolmaster is regarded as a leader. There are two others who help him- Maung Myint and Aung Gyi. Maung Myint is 48 years old and Aung Gyi is 37. The young men in the camp also recognise these three people as elders. The three of them undertake all responsibilities for dealing with the government and making representations to the government regarding rice, milk-powder, etc. They are not paid anything in money, but get a larger share in the allotments of food, etc., made by the government to the camp. "If we get one condensed milk tin of rice, they get one basket." All the other members of the camp , including U Myaing, are satisfied with this arrangement since these three have been doing the work for the past two years. The Chief Justice of the Union, U E Maung asked them to undertake this responsibility for the camp.

In the case of thieves who are caught the government comes to know about the thieves. "If the people in the camp catch a thief, they would tell him and only afterwards settle with the government. It was the same back in Pathee when a thief was caught. Even if he did not die he would have to suffer terribly. In Pathee it was the task of the headman to take the offender to the police station, but here in camp the station is quite near and the householder can take him to the station by himself. 625

The government works through the school-master. It gives him recognition as a leader in the affairs of the camp. Maung Myint has to look after the welfare of two sheds and their inmates, Aung Gyi has [illegible] three, and Ko Ba Khaing the school-master has the charge of the 621 641

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remaining huts. They have lists of the people in their charge. Maung Myunt and Aung Gyi are under the school-master, who is the most important and influential man of all. These people have to see to the DHANI thatch roof, the bamboo, etc., and if there are any repairs needed they get together, estimate the cost , and then go to the government authorities. U Myaing does not know which office they go to.

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The phongyis resident in the camp do not participate in the secular life of the camp, beyond giving the SILAS and coming occasionally for HSOON. In Pathwe village there were small boys whom they taught - thirty or forty of them, but in camp they do not help to educate the young. People go to these phongyis in camp on holy days, to take the SILAS. They do not even preach to the laity. This U Myaing thinks to be due to the fact that they do not know how to, being themselves refugees from country villages.

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On the 8th and 15th day of the waxing moon and the 8th and 15th day of the waning moon, the four holy days of the month, Daw Aw Zar goes to the Shwe Dagon to say her prayers. U Myaing cannot do likewise because he has to go to work.

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U Myaing has very little dealing with the government. They do not come for taxes, and in fact even have to provide the refugees with items of food and apparel. The people in the camp are not members of a closely knit organisation. They are made up of workers and families all thrown together by the exigencies of the political situation. The three mentioned above are the only ones in the whole camp. who have charge of the camp welfare. They take the responsibility for disposing of the bucket sewage and the dirt accumulated in and around the camp. They arrange for government sweepers to come for these. There have been no fire drills or any such exercise held in the camp.

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In Rangoon the family has few entertainments. There was once a government film show screened in the camp, and the other night Ma Khin Kyain went with some friends to a nearby pagoda to see a lantern slide show of Buddha's Relics. They have never seen a modern Burmese play or PYIKAT. As Daw Aw Zar expressed it, "How can we go and see one when the charge for admission is a rupee

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for an adult and 8 annas for a child."